THE EMPORER JONES

**A brief description of your interpretation of the text’s narrative**

“*The Emperor Jones*” by Eugene O’Neil follows the last night in the life of Brutus Jones, a self-proclaimed emperor of an island in the West Indies. He gained his position by oppressing the people of his own race and over the course of the night is maddened by their own traditional torments that reveal to him the ghosts of his past. The play is an exploration backwards through the African-American cultural timeline (as well as the personal journey through Jones’ life), manifested through six ethereal expressions described as the “Little Formless Fears”.

**The themes that you have identified as important**

Jones is in transition between two cultures, finding he cannot identify as one binary or another - black or white. This has become the central theme of my design, focussing on how Jones strove to make his black environment white but then realises he is denying that inside himself even the whiteness cannot be without the black. The theme of transition and journey between past, present and future is also a key theme as Jones explores the relevant areas of his timeline over the course of a single night (which is notably reported by the titles of each scenes being different times.)

**Significant moments/lines in the text**

My design was firstly inspired by particular descriptions of the settings that I found important in my abstraction.

“*The audience chamber in the palace of the Emperor – a spacious, high-ceilinged room with bare,* ***white-washed*** *walls. The floor is of* ***white tiles****. In the rear, to the left of centre, a wide archway giving out on a portico with* ***white pillars****.*” O’Neil clearly meant for the palace to surround the Emperor with whiteness, as if Jones was attempting to block out the blackness surrounding him – in the nearby forest, described as; “*In the rear, the forest is a* ***wall of darkness*** *dividing the world…the nearest trees [are] enormous* ***pillars of deeper blackness****.*”

And the design is made to function to accommodate and emphasize the seven most important time/space/mood changes (the palace, the first apparitions “*they are black, shapeless, only their glittering little eyes can be seen*”, Jeff, the Chain-Gang and Slave-Driver, the Auction, the Negroes arriving by boat and the final and most dramatic apparition of the Witch Doctor and Crocodile God and the final scene in which the body is returned to the edge of the forest.)

**Your conceptualisation of the performance text**

This performance will illustrate physically the desire Jones (perhaps subconsciously or as a representation of culturally) to return from white to black. In his attempts to deny his ‘blackness’ he further proves to himself how he cannot run from it.

The design is very minimal to allow for the action to become a part of the design. My proposition is to have the stage begin white from floor to ceiling broken by the “*pillars of deeper blackness*” that represent the trees. In the opening scene these will be shrouded but not unseen behind a barely opaque white curtain.   
  
When Jones enters the forest it will be only the white and black to represent the binaries he sees in his mind. As the first apparitions enter they scatter behind them black dust or sand that will stick to the stage and remain there around the edges – as if they are beginning to penetrate his mind. As he fires a shot, a drip of black paint/dye/liquid runs down the back wall. In the second scene, to mark the changing of time; the lights have changed in a way to represent that the moon has risen – over the course of the play it will be indicated that the moon keeps tracking across the sky. When Jeff appears and begins rolling the dice – his dice are covered in ink and as he rolls them, they stain the ground. When Jones kills him (as it will whenever he fires a shot) another drip of black runs down the back wall of white. The “*Formless Fears*” come and take the body away when Jones turns away. Third, the Chain Gang appear – they drag behind them chains also covered in ink and as they slam their shovels and pick-axes into the ground ink flows from out of the stage. The Slave-Driver is killed and once again a streak of black falls down the back wall. The auction brings a flood of people on stage – the white people dust the stage with white powder and the black with black powder. The action continues blackening the stage, the boat people carry on a white bench with them and sit and sway, when Jones shoots them the bench is drenched in black ink. The final apparition is the Witch Doctor – who appears wearing Zebra skin (as a symbol of black and white being represented together) and a great black man dressed as the Crocodile God spills waves of ink onto the stage from traditional clay pots. In the climactic finale, Jones is shot and killed – when he dies he leaks black from everywhere and falls far enough in front that when the curtain falls to represent being back in the palace, he is staining the floor of his white kingdom.